"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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The Rural Minister and the Country Church

The Country Church is Different*

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By Martin Schroeder

IT is more than a passing headache which the rural parish is causing the Christian church at the present time. The disturbance, euphemistically called "problem," is organic. A former indifference to the occasional pain which the country church was to many a denominational headquarters now makes it necessary to plan a series of major operations, provided they see the need of restoring the sufferer back to a useful life.

The assumption still exists that one type of preacher, leaving school, could serve either city or country church with equal ease and efficiency. From my own student days I well remember a lecturer who, belonging himself to the old "no-difference" school, addressed us hopefuls. "Gentlemen," he counseled benevolently, "it may do you no harm to spend the first five or ten years of your ministry in a country church." However, the context made it plain that the real stakes for the man with a message are in the city, where thousands live within reach of his influence and hear him preach—if they will come. The man who lectured might have been heard in almost any seminary. It was, and with some still is, "the line."

• *Life Service to Rural Church*

This writer fell for it. Promptly upon graduation he assumed the pastorate of a tiny, isolated parish. Five years passed. Ten years passed. He was still in the country. About that time he wrote an article on "The Attractions of the Rural Pastorate" which the editor of the *Expositor* found printable. In that article he went the lecturer one better. Instead of speaking of five to ten years among the farmers, the advice was given to set aside at least the first ten to fifteen years in the rural community. Since then ten more cycles of summer and winter have joined their predecessors, and still he finds himself, though in a changed relation, attached to the country church.

Today, after more than two decades of intimate contact with rural church life, he sees again the necessity of revising his estimate of the length of time a ministerial candidate should plan to spend in the country. To the man casting about for a field of labor he would say, if there is at all any serious thought in the direction of the small-community congregation, to set aside at least the first forty years of his ministry for the purpose, and for the time being eliminate notions of the enchanting city pulpit from his mind altogether. From the beginning it must be one thing or the other. Mixing the two separate types of labor in mind and practice is hard on preacher and congregations. Our purpose here is to correct, where necessary, our thinking in regard to country versus the city church as fields of labor, and to give reasons for this ever advancing change of mind concerning the length of time a man should spend in the country.

These reasons, which the perspective of years affords, are very simple. One is that, after you have approached your rural ministry with a purpose, you become a part of the setting. Your interests merge with those of the people you serve. You see their needs and the paucity of leadership to remedy deficiencies. If your heart is in it, you simply cannot break away. The other cause for this changing attitude comes by observation. The country is still dotted with prosperous rural congregations. What made them so prosperous, other things being equal, over against the problem community? The answer is not found in the name of the denomination, nor in the pulpit message primarily, but in the parsonage where you will find, almost invariably, long time residents. In other words, a continuously settled ministry is the prerequisite to achieve fortification of the rural church.

• *Why Rural Churches Close Up*

The wholesale closing of country churches must be ascribed to a great extent to preachers who were victims of the popular fancy that the city is the only place for the up-and-coming man of God to find a responsive field. Denominational guidance, with few shining exceptions, has failed uniformly in either maintaining or rehabilitating the resident rural pastorate. Witness the tens of thousands of liquidated rural churches, a waste in which religious leaders are not guiltless, though a belated change in attitude becomes more and more evident.

Let us make it plain. If for any reason a man feels that his call into the ministry precludes successful work in the country, he should put such work out of his mind completely. Never, not for five years or one (while waiting for the other call), not for one day should he impose himself upon a trusting farmers' congregation. The harm and havoc which such attitude has wrought in the rural field cannot be measured, though it is evident as the light of day. To enter the rural ministry with divided heart and mind is next thing to desecrating the humble place of worship. No man whose thoughts take flights to the city can warm a farmer's heart.

• *Special Preparation Is Necessary*

To assume that preparation for the rural ministry does not require special training is a too common fallacy. With this same sort of reasoning one might consider that a teacher or physician may work his way through any course leading to a general degree, hoping that the question of skill in a special line will take care of itself in due time. No one would ever think that way. But with the ministry it is different. Our city-located theological schools train future pastors with the

*Reprinted with the kind permission of the author and the editor of "The Christian Century Pulpit" from the June 1940 issue. Rev. Martin Schroeder, D.D., is Rural Work Representative of the Board of American Missions of the United Lutheran Church in America.

more or less alluring near-by city churches as ever present seducers to fill head and heart with city ideologies. Of all such institutions of every denomination and description only twenty-seven in the entire country give any semblance of recognition that a great portion of their students will have to work in sparsely populated districts. The result is many an unhappy ministry, the man finding himself in places for which God never intended him.

Taking it for granted that in the course of years church leadership will recognize the manifest claims of the country parish for a consecrated single-minded ministry, the question may now be asked, What qualities enter into the making of such a rural ministry? But before answering, it would be good to eliminate some erroneous suppositions which have kept good men from giving serious thought to the work we have here in mind.

• *Two Unfortunate Misconceptions*

There looms up the often heard remark, that the real country parson must be country bred for necessary background and experience; the scent of the sod must be in his clothes. Nothing can be farther from the truth. For the same reason all foreign missionaries ought to be foreign born if they are to understand the natives and their problems. Again, with the same logic, it could be argued that city pastors, professors and editors should necessarily have been born in the shadows of cathedrals, universities or sky-scraping city blocks. Not where a man is starting from determines his value for church and society, but the goal that in God's name is set before him.

Another misconception must be put aside. It is frequently assumed that the city is entitled to the cream of the ministerial supply, the skimmed portion to be left for the farmers' churches. For one thing, skimming should be done before men ever get near the seminary, or, if they should take the first hurdles, should be removed from circulation in the ministerial atmosphere before getting far in any formal training. It goes without saying, irrespective of future disposition in town or country, only the choicest in purpose should be found in any congregation. Albeit, the scramble for large student bodies occasionally brings into the group those who have no place in the ministry anywhere, and usually it is the country or unpromising small town church that has to put up with this unpromising timber, the result of a faulty selective process. The effect of such policy is written in unmistakable letters over many a closed country church, where a purposeful leader could have changed history.

• *Secrets of Success in Rural Field*

In weighing qualifications highly desirable in the man who will preach to farmers, the acquisition of which will set him aside for rural work in particular, let us turn now to the positive side.

1. He should possess a workable concept of rural life. The first lines in Holy Writ point helpfully in that direction. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Here you look at the two basic elements with which the tiller of the soil must work. Unceasingly we are reminded of the fact that from the earth man was taken and made a living soul, and from the earth he must daily derive the substance that keeps him a living soul. It is this earth, its nature and organic matter which the farmer shapes for maintaining human existence. The meaning of his life and work is therefore so much different from the city dweller's occupation, being primarily mechanistic, using nature's raw products, shaping them into artifices, often making them his idols before which he bows down.

• *Self-Sacrificial Patriotism*

2. He should be possessed also of a patriotic impulse to serve the nation. It is a well known fact that the nation's only net increase in population is found in towns and country, and there mostly among the farming portion of the people—pointing to the farm as the most wholesome place for a normal family life. The actual increase in city population depends upon the supply the country releases. What sort of church members this released section will make in the city is conditioned by the type of church they attended back home. Perennially the rural pastor must watch this exodus of promising young people whom the economic conditions of the country force, and the lights of the city entice, to make this change of location. Whereas city congregations often give impressive receptions to new acquisitions in membership, country churches might appropriately institute farewell services to the annual crop of farm youth whom fate or choice compels to leave the land and the city church gladly receives. To observe this continuous stream of one's spiritual products headed for other churches, for other pastors to enjoy their possession, requires fortitude and a Christian patriotism which places the welfare of his country above the bewitching gratification of ambition.

• *Knowledge of Bible Economics*

3. He must have also an understanding of biblical economics. It is not enough for the country preacher to be acquainted with the intricacies that are needed for guiding people in treating their souls in accordance with the original texts. These same original texts, though usually ignored in the study of fundamentals, give directions in the treatment of human needs other than those of the soul. Here belong the Sabbatical regulations of land ownership, the disposition of the fruit of the land, the wage problem as interpreted by Jesus in the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, and the cooperative trend described in the Acts of the Apostles. Each one is a contributing factor, if applied, in overcoming interferences with the nation's "pursuit of happiness," of which we are so conscious at this present time. So far, the church has sidestepped reading and emphasizing those pages in the Scriptures, fearing their unpopularity. It is the rural pastor's opportunity to shed light in that direction.

Shepherd of souls that he is, he cannot ignore the fact that these souls live on land which with its fruit is just as much God-given as man's inner and spiritual possession. Such pastor must be trained, or train himself, to understand the relation of these two worlds, the inner and the outer, under the inspiration of nature's God. Such realization cannot be acquired one day and discarded the next in exchange for a city complex. Either aspect of life requires a whole personality in the ministerial office to do justice to the widely diversified needs of the people over whom the shepherd is set.

• *The Rural Pastor a Distinct Type*

Why did such spiritual giants as Charles Kingsley and Frederic Oberlin repeatedly refuse the inducements of metropolitan pulpits in favor of their "unimportant" farming parishioners? Because the silent plea that spoke out of the need of their rural surrounding was more commanding to those two sensitive souls for the direction of their energy, than the fame which preaching to a massed population might offer.

For these reasons, to mention but a few, the country parson represents a distinct type which cannot be shifted indiscriminately from one field of church activity to another with impunity, a fact to which church administrators have paid scant attention. It will not do to turn candidates out according to a set standard and leave it to chance and accident that deficiencies will be corrected in case the man should find his field of endeavor in the country.

• *Adjustments to a Changed World*

The often heard plea not to draw

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If I Were a Rural Minister*

By Charles Josiah Galpin

IT is dangerous for a layman to attempt to describe either what the Christian minister is or ought to be, for he is sure to fall into error. However, if he is not totally in error, some good may come, and, if he should be totally in error, it may be well for the clergy to know what lies back in the layman's mind.

If I were to become a rural minister, I would hope that I could attend a rural theological seminary—that is, a seminary, established especially, if not exclusively, for persons intending to enter the rural ministry. I would be assured, in that case, of having teachers sympathetic with farm and village life. I would also expect to find a group of young men there who had picked out the rural ministry as a life work.

I would hope also that this theological seminary would be situated in close contact with one of our agricultural colleges, so that I could mingle with the young rural students and attend some of the agricultural college courses.

If I were a rural minister, I would pray that I might never forget that I am as certainly an ambassador of Christ to rural people, as Paul was an Apostle to the Gentiles. This ministry would not be to me an occupation but rather a sacred honor, a trust conferred from on high, in which I should be giving my life, not gaining a progressively better and better livelihood.

If I were a rural minister, I would never hold myself in line for a city parish. Like John Frederick Oberlin, I would say, "No, I will never leave this flock. God has confided this flock to me. Why should I abandon it?" I would not be seduced from my rural mission by the alluring inducements so plausible to many of my friends, such as an "easier life for the wife," "better education for the children," and "American standard of living," "congenial parish," "books," "travel," "art," "greater opportunity for service"—just such reasons as bankers, clerks, teachers, merchants give for their economic movements, to better themselves following the law of hire. I would decide to take pot-luck with the farmer and villager, sharing their lives, their privations, their struggles to organize a modern social and economic system for their communities, for them and their children.

I do not need to be told that the day would come when my heart would be troubled, when doubt would enter and temptation would assail me, as I lost faith in myself, in my work, and my mission turned sour and rural life lost its savor. I tell you now most seriously I would not try to fight this thing alone. I would flee to some man of God whom I could trust, and bask in the sunshine of his presence and faith until I could exclaim, "My soul, my soul. I have found it again."

If I were a rural minister, I would work at my task as hard, as unremittingly, as early, as late, as any of my parishioners. I could not excuse myself for inaction and short hours, on the ground of being engaged in much contemplation and thoughtful study; for I know the versatility of sloth, its subtlety and intrigue. I would fight this thing tooth and nail.

In order to be content in my mind, I should desire to know to the utmost, as precisely as possible, how far geographically my special responsibility as minister and pastor, to persons and families, lies. I shall be ill at ease until I am sure that no family that naturally belongs to me for Christian ministration is left out in the cold. By conference and agreement, therefore, with adjacent ministers I should map my parish with every farm and every village house that I must shepherd, whether any of them belong formally to my inner church group or not. I must know the whereabouts of my people. This map should hang large in my study and be the basis of much of my thinking and work.

It would never satisfy me to get my knowledge of my people and their problems from books of psychology, sociology and economics. Next to the Bible and my own Christian experience, the most used and valuable adjunct in my study would be my parish map and a file with a set of cards for every family, every person, for whom I should be responsible as an ambassador of Christ. To aid my memory I would enter on these cards all the important personal, biological, psychological, sociological and economic facts obtained by me in personal acquaintance with each person and family. My sermons would grow on the farms, in the barns, in the houses, on the highways of my parish.

If I were a rural minister, I would try to gear all my efforts in with the great general aim of the leaders of rural America to build a worthy rural civilization. My own aim would be a parish and a church of distinction that would in no sense be out of place in the coming civilization of rural America. On the rich heritage left by our American pioneers, I too would try to do my part to raise up a group of rural church men and women and children that would carry the banner of Christ worthily.

In ultimate terms, land is the source of life, and the struggles over land are the primary struggles for life itself. The world starves when land is idle or struck with blight. Hunger changes men into beasts. Potential hunger is a hidden threat facing both Church and State. Helots, serfs, slaves all grew out of the land problem. Peonage is a land problem. The refining, healing powers of the Church have, during the centuries, done much for the landed and the landless land workers. Now it is our turn. To us here and now in America is committed the problem of men, women and children who deal with the land and its plant and animal life in our stead, and of bringing to them the benefits of clergy and religion.

If I were a rural minister, I would study the rural population with an eye to discover the discriminations against farmer and villager—discriminations inherent in rural life itself—that I might plead with my parishioners to absorb these disfavors with fortitude; or discriminations that are unethical and preventable that I might do my part toward removing them.

Rural people suffer certain stigmas—farming, the stigma of the soil and dirt; the village, the stigma of littleness, the slur of being a "hick town." These stigmas have branded the rural children with disgrace until an almost irremovable psychology of inferiority has become the possession of rural people. This is an ethical and even religious issue. It would be my aim as a minister to replace this mark of shame with a high sense of worth, importance and honor —both in rural people themselves and in the mind of the nation.

Discontent is certain to crop up in rural life. The very presence of religion among men is an evidence that life is defective; wherever lived, whatever the accomplishments, accumulations, prosperity, friendships, pedigree. Like a

flaw in the steel, defects reveal themselves everywhere in life. As a rural minister, I should attempt to differentiate the inherent flaws in life itself from the flaws in mere occupation and residence. My aim would be to interpret a defective life in itself as something that religion alone heals. I would vigorously protest against the gloom and pessimism growing out of the belief that happiness and contentment will come in mere change of occupation and residence. If evils persist in bare occupation and residence, these may be improved. To the improvement of such conditions I will give my best efforts.

One thing I would never forget as a rural minister, namely, the American rural family is the biological mainstay of the American family and American society. It holds, therefore, a central place in the social system of America and of the American Church in particular. Family is the tender, delicate, sacred organism of race. When the family breaks down, no substitute known to man can mend the break, and family life is the first to crumble when deterioration sets in for race or nation.

I must not as a minister wait for the rural child to grow up, before I take him into serious account in my ministry; for the saying that "the child is father of the man" is a significant truth in the moral and religious struggles of man, as well as in the educational. Friendship, sympathy and understanding with my parish children will never be wasted. I must never slight or offend one of these little ones. Why? Because no soil is so fertile for good as the soul of the child; and the child has capacity for resolve and endeavor which may reach a point of fortitude in the moral scal which he may never reach again as an adult, but which w set a pace for the man that he becomes all his life. I myse have never surpassed the filial piety which when I w 10 years old rose strong in my heart one summer day in m father's country parish, when my father discovered th mother, setting out with the family horse and buggy ar two small children for a vacation to her father's farm, miles away, had left behind her 10-pound satchel containi among other things her best dress. My father said, "Charle can you hurry after Mother and take this satchel? It co tains her best dress. You might get a ride, and overta her." I replied, "I'll do my best." So I carried Mothe best dress, 18 miles to my grandfather's door, without ride, from nine in the morning until five in the afternoo faintly murmuring at the open door, "Mother, here is yo dress." How many times in my adult life I have said myself when under cracking strain, "I carried the dress Mother. I will try to go through this thing now."

In conclusion, a word about words and deeds. So mu of a preacher's task is a matter of his words (mere symbo of something, you know) about the deeds of others, th if I were a rural minister, I would seek and embrace oppo tunities to do deeds that would exemplify my words. would never hold myself above my fellows, either as bei too clean to work with my hands, too poor to give of m little, too weary to go where need is. My ministry shou not be in words only, but in deeds also.

*Reprinted with kind permission of the author and the editor of "The Pastors Journal" from the July 1940 issue. Dr. Galpin has for many years been a leader in the Country Life Movement of the United States and is deeply interested in the rural church.

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a distinction between rural and urban aspects of the ministerial office is contradicting the facts. It is true, there was a time when the above mentioned claims were not crying out loud as they do now, but that time is passed. The changes through which the world has passed during the last generation imply a myriad of adjustments. The church cannot stand alone trusting that she can escape making provision for adapting her methods and thinking to the various needs of her different groups, among which the farmer and the small community, without whom the city church would starve, occupy a strategic place.

Unless the church and each individual pastor give heed to the respec tive importance and type of religiou work in both city and village churches Christianity as a whole may, by polit ical action or popular attitude, b assigned in the national life a positio void of authority and respect. Don' say, "It cannot happen here."

JOHN FREDERICK OBERLIN FELLOWSHIP OF NEW ENGLAND

The Covenant

Mindful of the above words spoken by one who is reverenced by many as the patron saint of the Country Church I would become a member of THE JOHN FREDERICK OBERLIN FELLOWSHIP. Patterning after Oberlin, and his spirit, I would make his wish my own. I would covet the work rather than the wage. The following ideals commend themselves to me as a pattern for my ministry.

I will look upon the countryside as an ideal field for service and for the investment of the one life I have to live on earth.

I will love the country, her people, and her institutions, for themselves and will try to upbuild them after their own pattern rather than imitating some other.

I will esteem the opportunity presented by the rural ministry and the country church as the equal of any and will never use them as merely a means of self-advancement or selfish gain.

I will try to keep my ministry abreast of every other rural occupation in intelligence, industry and technique.

I will recognize the interdependence of the town and country and make these churches to which I minister centers of genuine service which will reach out in friendliness beyond the limits of the town to the people living in the open country.

I will stay by each parish long enough to do a thorough piece of work leaving behind me an enduring program which will continue long after I am gone.

Because Jesus Christ was so much a country preacher possessed of an absorbing passion for the country and country folk, I wish to follow him into the countryside with a special ministry to his people. Bearing in mind the rural background and content to be seen in his sermons and teaching, I would use nature, the soil and country life as He did, thus ministering to country people in terms of their own wonderful environment.